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## Literary Devices toward the Mythological in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*

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Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is rich in mythological resonances which are manifested as symbols, archetypes, allusions and characters based in classical, Judeo-Christian, and Egyptian mythologies, among others. This amalgam of mythological resonances comprises the novel's overall structure: a quest myth paradigm of the kind found in such works as Homer's *Odyssey* and *The Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius. Using a range of literary devices, Melville invokes and applies the mythological heritages on two levels: explicitly with direct references or comparisons, and implicitly through allusion or parallel imagery and symbolism. This study will examine several of the discrete mythological symbols in the work, the specific devices Melville uses to incorporate these symbols into the novel, tracing them to the sources from which they are drawn, and the larger paradigm they form.

It is advisable at the outset of this study to define central terms used throughout, such as "myth," "mythology," and "archetype." Webster's defines myth as "A usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon."<sup>1</sup> This definition will be used throughout this study, while also acknowledging Northrup Frye's observation that "Most myths are stories about or concerning the gods."<sup>2</sup> And, "Myths stick together to form a mythology, a large interconnected body of narrative that covers all the religious and historical revelation that its society is concerned with, or concerned about."<sup>3</sup> It follows then that "mythology" in this study means a "large interconnected body of narrative" based on myths.

"Archetype" is adopted herein not in the Jungian sense of structures of the collective unconscious but in the Augustinian sense; as Mircea Eliade terms it, an "exemplary model" or "paradigm" derived from and inherent to at least one mythology<sup>4</sup>. This conjoins well with Frye's definition of archetype as "A symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one's literary experience as a whole."<sup>5</sup>

Melville's sources for the mythological symbols, metaphors and allusions which form such an integral part of the work, and help to imbue his literary expression with such vibrancy, are many and extensive. The "Extracts" chapter at the outset of the novel serves as a starting point for tracing some of the preliminary sources of this kind, and also provides clues suggesting how the author organizes and applies them in the body of the novel. In the chapter, he cites passages from works as diverse as Milton's *Paradise Lost*

to Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*.

The chapter opens with excerpts from Genesis, Job, Jonah, Psalms, and Isaiah. Moreover, it is notable that the names of both the novel's narrator, Ishmael, and its dark protagonist, Ahab, are also derived from the Bible (while there are several Ishmaels in the Bible, there is only one Ahab: "But there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the LORD" (*I Kings* xxi, 25)). Other characters from this source include Gabriel (a crew-member of the *Jeroboam*, the ship's name itself taken from *I Kings* xi ff), Bildad (*Job* viii, 3-6) and Elijah (*I Kings* xxi, 19). It is clear, then, that the Bible is the primary source for all religious and mythological imagery and references in *Moby Dick*.

However, the Bible is by no means Melville's only wellhead of inspiration; the "Excerpts" chapter spans a broad range of base materials both scientific and literary. For the scientific information and taxonomic background of whales (cetology), Beale's *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale* was his most important source book. William Scoresby's *An Account of the Arctic Regions with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery* was also a principal source. And Melville's own experience as a crew member on both whaling and naval vessels cannot be underestimated. Beginning in 1841, at the age of 22, he served in succession aboard the whaling ships the *Acushnet*, *Lucy Ann*, and *Charles and Henry*, then aboard the navy frigate *United States*. His experiences as a hand on these ships and from experiences in the lands they visited (Melville "jumped ship" more than once) provided invaluable material for his later writing.

Yet the "Excerpts" chapter is only an overview of the formative and informative sources drawn upon in producing the novel. Noting wryly that the excerpts were provided by a "sub-sub-librarian . . . picking up whatever random allusions to whales he could anyways find in any book whatsoever, sacred or profane," Melville himself warns,

Therefore you must not, in every case at least, take the higgledy-piggledy whale statements, however authentic, in these extracts, for veritable gospel cetology. Far from it. As touching the ancient authors generally, as well as the poets here appearing, these extracts are solely valuable or entertaining, as affording a glancing bird's eye view of what has been promiscuously said, thought, fancied, and sung of Leviathan, by many nations and generations, including our own.<sup>6</sup>

The key, then, to the novel's greater meaning lies elsewhere.

It is worthwhile to return to Melville's onomastic device of deriving names from the Bible, because it is an example of the author's use of explicit citations and references which tie the novel's plot and characters directly to biblical and mythological precursors. In other words, by applying devices of this kind, Melville deliberately crafts the work to function on an overt mythological level. However, this is not done in such a way as to reduce the work to what Melville himself calls "a hideous and intolerable allegory." (p.

306) While Ishmael and Ahab, for example, may bear similarities to their biblical models, and Elijah's depiction in *Moby Dick* vis-a-vis Ahab is similar to his role as a prophet in the Bible, none of these depictions are so simple, continuous, or predictable so as to reduce the plot to mere allegorical replication. The novel's allegory is in what Frye calls the "freistimmige style," which means it is picked up and dropped again at pleasure.<sup>7</sup>

Melville also makes frequent use of similes to tie elements within the novel to their mythological origins (archetypes). A few examples: "The silent harpoon burned there like a serpent's tongue" (p. 617), "I feel deadly faint, bowed, and humped, as though I were Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since paradise" (pp. 651-52), "The bird of heaven, with archangelic shrieks ... folded in the flag of Ahab, went down with his ship, which, like Satan, would not sink to hell till she had dragged a living part of heaven along with her, and helmeted herself with it" (p. 685). And from the epilogue: "Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve." (P. 687)

In addition to onomastics and similes, Melville explicitly refers by comparison to mythological plots or conflicts (*agon*) which bear relevance to events in the novel and Ishmael's interpretation of those events. These citations broaden the dimensions of mythological resonances in *Moby Dick* and also serve as a structural framework; they are, in other words, simultaneously content and context. One such example is found in "The Honor and Glory of Whaling."

Akin to the adventure of Perseus and Andromeda—indeed, by some supposed to indirectly be derived from it — is that famous story of St. George and the Dragon; which dragon I maintain to have been a whale; for in many old chronicles whales and dragons are strangely jumbled together, and often stand for each other. 'Thou art as a lion of the waters, and as a dragon of the sea,' saith Ezekiel; hereby, plainly meaning a whale; in truth, some versions of the Bible use that word itself ... Any man may kill a snake, but only Perseus, a St. George, a Coffin, have the heart in them to march boldly up to a whale. (P. 470)

The chapter concludes, "Perseus, St. George, Hercules, Jonah, and Vishnoo! there's a member-roll for you! What club but the whaleman's can head off like that?" (P. 472)

The reader here faces not one mythological heritage but three: Perseus and Hercules from the Greek, Jonah and St. George from the Judeo-Christian, and Vishnoo (Vishnu) from the Hindu! Thus this passage is important not simply because it is an example of explicit citation, but also because it demonstrates the way in which Melville combines and juxtaposes selected mythologies to enrich a single symbol: in this case, the whale and the quest for it.

Overt references of this kind and the devices used to convey them create surface reverberations for the reader which are manifestations of Melville's vast knowledge of mythol-



ogy and his means of educating the reader in this regard. As a writer, however, the final purpose of these references is a literary one; they reinforce and enrich the author's artistic vision and the novel itself, rather than serving simply as its subject.

The necessary complement to the explicit references in *Moby Dick* is an underlying and implicit mythological level, which mainly comprises allusions to myths and their symbols. One such example of allusion, more precisely a series of allusions, is to the Osiris myth. Both in imagery and evocation of character, Ahab is likened to Osiris, the Egyptian god of the underworld. Like Osiris, he is dismembered (by losing his leg to Moby Dick) and his flesh is scattered on the sea. He returns to his point of origin (Nantucket) only to set out once again to search for the whale, that is, to descend again into the Underworld. (The confrontation between Ahab and the typhoon in the chapter "The Candles" may be seen as an apotheosis of a number of Osiris allusions, specifically, to the confrontation between Osiris and Typhoon.) H. Bruce Franklin, in *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology*, delineates some of the other symbols from Egyptian myth found in the novel:

Ahab is also a priest-king-god who sails the world in a ship which is equated with the constellation Argo. He also hunts an aquatic monster who symbolizes the ocean and all in nature that is malignant to man. Once a year, for three consecutive years, he is dismembered by the aquatic monster which he hunts. The first two times he also disappears for a length of time and then is healed with the advance of the sun. Ahab also is described as ruler of the infernal regions. Phallic rituals, fire worship, and infernal orgies are conducted on this ship, which also sails the world bearing a coffin.<sup>8</sup>

Another predominant pattern of allusions is of Ahab as a Titan, particularly in his expression of an overpowering and defiant will: "That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me." (P. 262) And, "What I've dared, I've willed; and what I've willed, I'll do." (P. 266)

The implicit allusions of this kind throughout the work are often augmented by one or more explicit references. In "The Candles," for example, such imagery as the ship's mast-heads burning and Ahab's harpoon producing a "flame of pale, forked fire," is a clear allusion to Prometheus, as are Ahab's words, "Oh, thou foundling fire, thou hermit immortal, I read my sire. Leap! leap up, and lick the sky!" (P. 629) Elsewhere, the comparison is stated directly in an observation by Ishmael: "... god help thee, old man, thy thoughts have created a creature in thee; and he whose intense thinking thus makes him a Prometheus; a vulture feeds upon that heart forever; that vulture the very creature he creates." (P. 303)

Because of the ambiguity of some of these allusions, when attempting to interpret or trace them, there is always the risk of misinterpretation and of reading more into the text than is actually there. Ahab was "dis-masted" by Moby Dick, then had an artificial leg

made from whale-bone (ivory). Could one, then, speak of him as a Pelops figure? Or is Ahab a Pasiphae embodiment, seduced by the awesomeness of the sea-born, snow-white whale? Does the scene toward the novel's close, of Fedallah bound to Moby Dick's back, redound to Europa and the bull? Is Moby Dick a minotaur figure? Are the crew members of the *Pequod* (its "Isolatoos") a kind of Greek chorus, all the other ships encountered representative of society?

The answers to these questions are elusive, and the effort spent in trying to find them might well end up fruitless. However, tracing specific allusions is not as important as recognizing that the allusions as a body make up one of the novel's two mythological levels; they are alloys forming a larger structural framework. This framework, or paradigm, is what Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* calls the "adventure myth," and individual archetypes in the novel, such as Ahab as Prometheus, are ordered within this paradigm. A classical mythological example of this kind of hero and search is Jason and his quest for the golden fleece in Apollonius Rhodius' *The Argonautica*. Campbell explains the adventure myth as follows:

The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage ... Beyond the threshold ... the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward ... The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued ... the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).<sup>9</sup>

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and his other works, Campbell examines these myths and their structure (more from an anthropological than a literary perspective) in an effort "to uncover some of the truths disguised for us under the figures of religion and mythology by bringing together a multitude of not-too-difficult examples and letting the ancient meaning become apparent of itself."<sup>10</sup> In examining examples of the quest myth, he focuses on the role of the hero and the trials he or she must undergo while carrying out the divine quest. Among some of these phases and trials are: "the call to adventure," "the crossing of the threshold," "the belly of the whale," "the road of trials," "apotheosis," and "the ultimate boon." As noted above, after obtaining the ultimate boon, the hero (in most cases) returns to enrich society with the knowledge he or she has gained.

Many if not all of these themes can be found in *Moby Dick*. In addition, because the novel is epic and encyclopedic in form, its adventure paradigm encompasses themes from the romance genre as well. This genre, Northrop Frye notes, exists between the area of myth, which is "one extreme of literary design," and the area of naturalism; romance

"displaces" myth in a human direction while simultaneously conventionalizing content in an "idealized" direction.<sup>11</sup> It is "the tendency to suggest implicit mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience [than with 'undisplaced myth']."<sup>12</sup> Frye writes,

No book can rival the continuity of the newspaper, and as soon as romance achieves a literary form, it tends to limit itself to a sequence of minor adventures leading up to a major or climacteric adventure, usually announced from the beginning, the completion of which rounds off the story. We may call this major adventure, the element that gives literary form to the romance, the quest.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in light of the definitions of both Campbell and Frye, the paradigm of *Moby Dick* is best termed an "adventure quest."

For the purposes of this study, the most nodal element of Campbell's schema is the phase deemed "the belly of the whale." He writes, "The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died."<sup>14</sup> Examples of this image include the Blackfoot tale of the "Blood-Clot Boy" (who is blown into the mouth of a great fish during a wind storm where he finds a great many people inside and frees them by cutting his way out with a knife); the Inuit tale of Raven (who darts into the belly of a whale and then kills it by eating his way through one of its major arteries); the Greek tale of Heracles; and the Judeo-Christian tale of Jonah and the whale.

In each of these and other similar tales, the imagery is one of descent. This descent theme is central to Frye's interpretation of the mythological universe, which he sees as comprising four levels: the highest level of heaven, "... the place of the presence of God," the second level of an earthly paradise or Garden of Eden "where man lived before the fall," the third level of the world of ordinary experiences in which humans now live (man, though born into this world, is not of it), and the fourth of the demonic world or hell.<sup>15</sup>

The motif of descent is, in effect, a passage not only into the belly of the whale, but also into a dream world, which, according to Campbell's schema, the mythological hero enters upon "crossing of the first threshold." In *Moby Dick*, this occurs when the *Pequod* leaves Nantucket on Christmas day. In Frye's mythological universe, there is a dialectic of dream comprising "... the wish-fulfillment dream and the anxiety or nightmare dream of repugnance."<sup>16</sup> Though Frye considers dream an archetypal aspect of the *dianoia* of a work of literature, and Campbell views dreams as embodiments of Jungian, or subconscious, archetypes, the two treatments appear to converge when applied to consideration of the quest myth. Thus, the archetypal imagery encountered after the hero's departure

takes place within the context of, but is not limited to, the dream world.

In descending into the belly of the whale, the hero, literally and metaphorically, passes downward into the sea, which has particular significance in all bodies of myth and mythology. Melville writes, "Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning ... It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all." (P. 95) And later,

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water ... treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider ... the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both ... and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life ... Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return! (P. 381)

In *Moby Dick*, the sea embodies hell and the white whale is the most "dreaded creature" gliding beneath its waters.

In contrast to this description of the sea is the depiction of the port, which "... would fain give succor; the port is pitiful; in the port is safety, comfort, hearthstone, supper, warm blankets, friends, all that's kind to our mortalities." (P. 202) The port of Nantucket in the novel is a fixed point on the "green, gentle, and most docile earth." It is what Campbell calls a "world navel":

The torrents from an invisible source, the point of entry being the center of the symbolic circle of the universe, the immovable Spot ... around which the world may be said to revolve. Beneath this spot is the earth-supporting head of the cosmic serpent, the dragon, symbolical of the waters of the abyss, which are the divine life-creative energy and substance of the demiurge, the world-generative aspect of immortal being ... the hero as the incarnation of God is himself the navel of the world, the umbilical point through which the energies of eternity break into time. Thus the World Navel is the symbol of the continuous miracle of vivification which wells within all things.<sup>17</sup>

It is clear from this passage (i.e. "... the dragon, symbolical of the waters of the abyss, which is the divine life-creative energy and substance of the demiurge") and from Campbell's overall schema, that a cyclical process of fruition (prosperity and good fortune), and decline followed by vivification (renewal) is central to mythology in general and to the quest myth in particular.

The archetype of vivification and renewal in *Moby Dick* is that of the "dying god." The whale's divinity is treated in the chapter aptly titled "Moby Dick": "One of the wild suggestings referred to ... was the unearthly conceit that Moby Dick was ubiquitous; that he had actually been encountered in opposite latitudes at one and the same instant in time." (P. 280) The depiction continues, "... some whalemens should go still further in their superstitions; declaring Moby Dick not only ubiquitous, but immortal (for immortality is but ubiquity in time)" (p. 281), and concludes, "Nor was it his unwonted magnitude, nor his remarkable hue, nor yet his deformed lower jaw, that so much invested the whale with natural terror, as that unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults." (P. 282) These three qualities of ubiquity, immortality, and intelligence or malignant omniscience, however sceptical the tone of their presentation (e.g., the terms "wild suggestings" and "superstitions"), define Moby Dick as a god. (In a more categorical reference, a crew member of the *Jeroboam* "... announced himself as the archangel Gabriel ... in his gibbering insanity, the White Whale to be no less a being than the Shaker God incarnated." (Pp. 421-22)) Thus, as pointed out, while Moby Dick represents the fourth or lowest level of Frye's mythological universe, he is also a divine figure.

Melville explicitly acknowledges the vivification resulting from the death of a god, the need for this life-producing death, and human recognition of this need. He writes,

Yet this is life. For hardly have we mortals by long toilings extracted from this world's vast bulk its small but valuable sperm; and then, with weary patience, cleansed ourselves from its defilements, and learned to live here in clean tabernacles of the soul; hardly is this done, when — There she blows! — the ghost is spouted up, and away we sail to fight some other world, and go through young life's routine again. (P. 539)

And later, "For all his old age ... and his blind eyes, he [the whale] must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all." (Pp. 465-66)

Inextricably bound to the archetype of the dying god are archetypes of rituals surrounding that death. Unlike the dialectic of dream previously cited, the rituals are cyclical patterns of behavior central to beliefs and belief systems. As Frye notes, "Rituals, like myths, begin in the stage of society described by the term *religio*: they are symbolic acts of social cohesion in which the acts that we think of as specifically 'religious' are not yet clearly differentiated from others."<sup>18</sup>

The dying god belief and the rituals connected to it receive a great deal of treatment in Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Characteristic of all of Frazer's writing, he catalogs in great detail several examples of the dying god belief as it has been practiced in disparate cultures. Of particular interest for this study is the chapter entitled

"Homeopathic Magic of a Flesh Diet" in which he describes a sacramental ritual and the principles behind it.

We have found a widespread custom of eating the god sacramentally, either in the shape of the man or animal who represents the god, or in the shape of bread made in human or animal form. The reasons for thus partaking of the body of the god are, from the primitive standpoint, simple enough. The savage commonly believes that by eating the flesh of an animal or man he acquires not only the physical, but even the moral and intellectual qualities which were characteristic of that animal or man; so when the creature is deemed divine, our simple savage naturally expects to absorb a portion of its divinity along with its material substance.<sup>19</sup>

Frazer's observation is relevant to the behavior of at least one crew member of the *Pequod*. Stubb's actions bears an uncanny resemblance to those of the "simple savage" above, for it is he who partakes of this ritual of eating of the whale (leviathan, god).

Stubb ... was somewhat intemperately fond of the whale as a flavorish thing to his palate ... About midnight that steak was cut and cooked; and lighted by two lanterns of sperm oil, Stubb stoutly stood up to his spermaceti supper at the capstan-head, as if that capstan were a sideboard. (P. 398)

The ancient Greek word for "fate," moira, means literally a portion, a piece of meat from a ritually sacrificed animal. In eating the whale steak Stubb is literally (as subsequent events in the novel show) partaking of his fate.

Another example in the novel of rituals based on archetypes is the oath to pursue Moby Dick which Ahab intimidates his officers and crew into making. Assembled on the quarter-deck, using the "detached iron part of their harpoons" inverted to hold the "fiery water," Starbuck, Stubb and Flask must enter into the pledge, to "drink and swear ... Death to Moby Dick!" The "replenished pewter" then goes "the rounds among the frantic crew." (P. 251) The connection between fate and ritual is important in this scene as well. As Margaret Visser notes, "Fate or moira is closely linked to the idea of ... oaths and curses — words which create ineluctable events in the future."<sup>20</sup>

A great deal of attention has been given in this study to the role of the mythological hero. (As mentioned, in a vertical ascent back to the level or World Navel from which the hero first set out, he or she returns with the "ultimate boon" to enrich the world and reverse the cycle of deterioration.) Depictions of Ahab in scenes such as that above clearly raise questions about his qualifications and role as hero. Moreover, Ahab does not adhere to the definitive criteria that "The hero is the man of self-achieved submission."<sup>21</sup> His goal is selfish and self-serving, perhaps even insane. As Ishmael puts it, "Ahab had some glimpse of this, namely: 'all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad'." (P. 285) Moreover, while Ahab's characterization may redound to depictions of Osiris or

Prometheus, unlike those figures, his aim is selfish, blasphemous and profane (cf "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me." (P. 262)), and as such, his motive and actions do not vivify civilization but are inimical to it. They ultimately result in the destruction of the *Pequod* and the death of every crew member but Ishmael.

However, from the standpoint of a literary critique, it is worthwhile to consider the ways in which Ahab does fit the hero's role. In this regard, it may be said that he is a hero who has lost the "luck" necessary to successfully accomplish the quest. Though there are many devices and fateful workings in mythology that bring this about, in this case the loss would be a result of the self-destructive quality of *hybris* or *hamartia*.

Another mythological perspective would be of Ahab as what Campbell deems a "tyrant-monster." (King Minos is an example of such a figure.)

The figure of the tyrant-monster is known to the mythologies ... He is the hoarder of the general benefit. He is the monster avid for the rights of 'my and mine' ... The inflated ego of the tyrant is a curse to himself and his world — no matter how his affairs may seem to prosper. Self-terrorized, fear-haunted, alert at every hand to meet and battle back the anticipated aggressions of his environment, which are primarily the reflections of the uncontrollable impulses to acquisition within himself, the giant of self-achieved independence is the world's messenger of disaster, even though, in his mind, he may entertain himself with humane intentions.<sup>22</sup>

Ahab, however, has shadings of divinity that belie this interpretation of him as an earthly "tyrant-monster." Peleg calls him "a grand ungodly, god-like man," and Ishmael says, in an acknowledgement that Ahab's vengeance may have been undertaken for humanity's sake, "He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it." (P. 283) However, while Ahab may be the novel's protagonist, his characterization is too contradictory to define him categorically as either mythological hero or tyrant-monster.

In seeking to identify the hero figure, it is crucially important to note who brings back the "ultimate boon," which is not Ahab but Ishmael. And although Ishmael is not portrayed as the character at the center of the adventure quest in the sense of being the catalyst of action (the novel's protagonist), he is the mythological hero of *Moby Dick*, both in deed and definition.

From a thematic and interpretive standpoint, this conclusion might not be as jarring as it might at first seem. There are thematic similarities between Ishmael and Ahab, but not to the extent that they can be seen as doppelgänger figures (thus there is no transference of the hero's mantle to Ishmael from Ahab after his death). Like Ahab, Ishmael admits feelings of misanthropy and despair: "Whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me,



that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off — then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball." (P. 93) Ishmael is able to summon the "strong moral principle" that Ahab cannot or will not. Moreover, he does not have the *wille zur macht* that is the captain's foremost distinguishing characteristic. Therefore, while Ishmael may not be a "man of self-achieved submission," he is certainly one of self control. Unlike Ahab, he is not only able to get on with peers and superiors alike, but is also able to convey his thoughts and emotions to others. He functions within the community rather than outside of it.

Finally, the reader is faced with the question of what the "ultimate boon" brought back by Ishmael is. It is not clearly explained in the work, nor is the term itself defined by mythologists any further than as a "knowledge" that vivifies society. Even Ishmael, carrier of the boon, is unable to verbalize its meaning. He knows that his effort is more than his heart and mind can apprehend, yet at the same time he recognizes the crucial importance of bestowing the gift that he holds ("But how can I hope to explain myself here; and yet, in some dim, random way, explain myself I must, else all these chapters might be naught." (P. 287)). The means of conveying the boon also threaten to elude him. He cannot adequately verbalize the gift, and concludes, "I ... shall be content to produce the desired impression by separate citations of items ... and from these citations, I take it — the conclusion aimed at will naturally follow of itself." (P. 303) The ultimate boon is the story Ishmael offers the reader of Ahab and *Moby Dick*, the *Pequod*, its crew, and all the world that is encountered. It is the novel itself, a manifestation of Melville's literary vision and an embodiment of his original ontology.

The configurations explored in this study hopefully have helped to provide keys to understanding the author's literary devices, and the novel's structure and knowledge base. Any study of this length, however, of a work as rich in imagery and meaning as *Moby Dick*, can only touch upon some of its aspects. Has the effort been worthwhile? Ishmael observes (p. 275), "— can we thus hope to light upon some chance clue to conduct us to the hidden cause we seek? Let us try."

## Notes

1. "Myth," Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1969 ed.
2. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), p. 8.
3. Ibid., p.9.
4. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos in History* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1954), p. vii.
5. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 365.
6. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ed. by Harold Beaver (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), x. (All subsequent passages from *Moby Dick* will be cited in the text.)
7. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 90.



8. H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville's Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 74.
9. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949), pp. 245-246.
10. Ibid., p. vii.
11. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 136-137.
12. Ibid., pp. 139-140.
13. Ibid., pp. 186-187.
14. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 90.
15. See, for example, "The Drunken Boat: the Revolutionary Element in Romanticism" in *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed., Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 1-26.
16. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 106.
17. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp. 40-41.
18. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture*, p. 55.
19. Sir James Gordon Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edition (London: Macmillan and Co., 1929), p. 494.
20. Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 233-234.
21. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, p. 16.
22. Ibid., p. 15.

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